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## THE PHILOSOPHICAL INHERITANCE OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

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**A**LTHOUGH the teaching of Rabindranath Tagore represents a certain modification of the prevailing conservatism of Indian philosophical and religious thought, it would be a mistake to find in his work an abrupt transition from an old world to a new. He is in no sense a reactionary. He has much in sympathy with such a retrospective teacher as the late Swami Vivekananda who was altogether held in bondage by the ideas of the past and whose influence upon the people of India is still unrivalled even by that of the world famous poet and thinker who is the particular object of this study. Moreover, Rabindranath belongs to a religious community which, while undoubtedly progressive, yet attaches great value to traditional religious thought, and he shares the reverence of his brethren.

Thus the saying that he is "to a large extent a member of a western religious world" is true only in a limited sense. One may, of course, with complete justification indicate that the light came to him "not by eastern windows only." He opened his soul to the ideas of the west and he has drawn from Christianity, especially, ideas the influence of which upon his whole trend of thought has not always been acknowledged. The eastern dress which he has given to these ideas has often concealed both from his own eyes and those of his readers their true origin, and, although truth is one and inhabits no particular clime, absence of indication here has sometimes led to consequences prejudicial to the development of truth itself. The ideas of Rabindranath, like those of so many thinkers of modern India, have often been quite wrongly assigned to Indian sources, and this has led his adherents to expect, also mistakenly, that they will be able to derive from the

same source many other ideas suitable for application to modern conditions of life and stimulative of individual and social progress. The result is a certain degree of blindness to the necessity of that radical transformation of Indian religious and metaphysical thought which can alone make progress possible. The western admirers of Rabindranath seem in like manner to have been misled into minimising the vast importance of the contribution which Christianity has made to the thought of modern India, and they have failed in a measure to realise their responsibility in reference to the continuance and enlargement of that contribution. Any sustained study of Indian thought will reveal to us the greatness of India's need for a more vivifying conception of religion than her own sacred tradition can supply. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore are evidence that this need is being met by the sons of India herself, but it would have been met still more fully if he had pointed a little more frequently to the sources of his inspiration, and had directed others, in language which they could not fail to understand, towards the same fountain.

The influence of non-Indian religious thought is unmistakable, and the ideas which Rabindranath has derived from the philosophical, scientific, ethical and even poetical, thought of the west appear repeatedly on his pages, increasing his emphasis upon activity and personality, and impressing upon him the necessity of a metaphysical basis for morality. They help him to realise that the crown of life is ultimately in affirmation rather than in negation, and that deep and abiding sources of joy are to be found in the communion of the free spirit with the eternal love of God, manifested in and through the actual experiences of our every day.

Yet though Rabindranath is *both* Eastern and Western, he is more Eastern than Western, and it would be a mistake to think that, because he sits somewhat loose to any particular Indian system of doctrine or of life, the traditional element in his teaching is anything less than dominating.

It may be true, as Mr. Leslie Johnston says, that he had "no coherent body of theology and religious practice behind him" (cf. *Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1914), or, as Pandit S. N. Tattvabhushan indicates, that he was led more by the workings of his own soul than by the influence and inspiration of any great teacher such as his father, the Maharshi or Keshub Chun der Sen. But we must not be misled by such statements as these into minimising the influence upon him of the past intellectual and religious history of India. He may not have followed any particular religious teacher amongst the Brahmos, but this may have been because his inheritance was wider than Brahmoism. In certain aspects indeed he is hardly so revolutionary as Brahmoism in general. As regards his relations to the land of his birth, he might be said to unite two streams—the Brahmo tradition and the orthodox tradition—without surrendering himself altogether to the force of either current.

He himself readily acknowledges his debt to the past of his own race, country and family. In the preface to *Sadhana* he speaks reverently of the influence of his father upon him, and tells how he was brought up in a family where the texts of the Upanishads were used daily in family worship. The ancient scriptures of his country are not for him matters of antiquarian interest only. "The verses of the Upanishads," he says, "and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit and therefore endowed with boundless vital growth." His avowed aim is to give to western readers "an opportunity of coming into touch with the ancient spirit of India as revealed in her sacred texts and manifested in the life of to-day" (Preface, VII and VIII). What specially interests us here is to show how far the ancient spirit of India—especially in its pantheistic aspects—moulds the thought of this modern teacher, how he draws from this inheritance the best that is in it, but also to a large extent modifies and transforms it, leaving behind much that is less desirable; and how finally he is prevented by traditional pantheistic influence

from giving to his characteristic thoughts the completeness they might otherwise have had.

The influence upon him of the concrete and positive pantheism of India is greater than that of the abstract phase. At times, indeed, he shows a certain negative tendency, but it is a negative tendency which emphasises all that is good in negation. It is a transformation of ordinary values in the interests of spirituality, and is not a denial of all values. He tries to make men understand the worthlessness of their ordinary possessions, but does not teach that everything in ordinary experience is worthless. He wishes indeed that only a little be left of him, but the little that is left must be sufficient to link every part of his being with God (cf. *Gitanjali*, 34). Occasionally, indeed, there is evidence of a strain of passivity such as is the usual accompaniment of negative pantheism, and the individual seems to be lost in the immensity of the All. But on the whole the trend of his teaching is in the active and positive direction. He would inspire us with courage to "knock at every open door." When he emphasises the idea that the end we are to aim at is union with God, he is careful also to point out that this union is not to be reached by destroying all differences, but rather by conserving those that have worth in a fullness of communion with the Divine.

The *All* for Rabindranath is the concrete and not the abstract universal. Expression in the particular is a reality, and not merely an appearance. "The universal," he says "is ever seeking its consummation in the unique," and this phrase marks a strong contrast between his teaching and that of the arch traditionalist Vivekananda, who holds that this striving of the Absolute to express itself in the finite is doomed to hopeless failure, and that "there will come a time when the Absolute will find that it is impossible and will have to beat a retreat" (Vivekananda, *Jnana-Yoga*, p. 16). Rabindranath explicitly dissociates himself from the negative aspect of thought which this quotation from Vivekananda indicates. He

holds strongly that the pervading tendency of Indian thought is positive, and that its highest endeavour is to affirm the presence of the Infinite in all things. We have but to open our eyes to the nature that is around us, and we shall find everywhere an object of worship. If we will but view all these objects in their ultimate unity, rising beyond law to the Being of whose character law is the expression, we shall reach the Infinite. From the bosom of the Infinite our lives have come, but we have left our resting place and our home. Our hands are filled with the merchandise of the markets of the world, and with getting and spending we have laid waste our powers. Or, to vary the metaphor, we have tried to walk on "the single rope of humanity" in the tenuous life of individuality. So we have been straining ever to keep our balance, and, abandoning ourselves to the necessity of incessant movement, we have missed the secret of the repose of nature. We have forgotten the breadth of our life and its infinitely multiplied and various connection with the All. We have forgotten, as the *Gitanjali* puts it in still another figure, that "the same stream of life, which runs through my veins night and day, runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measure" (69).

Rabindranath is almost Wordsworthian in his attitude to natural beauty, in his appreciation of details and his prayer that the doors of his senses may never be shut. But it is of his debt to eastern tradition that he is most fully aware even in this connection. He points out the difference between Greek and Indian civilisation. The former was "nurtured within city walls," and the walls became typical of its character. Indian civilisation, on the other hand, found its natural home in forests, near to nature, surrounded by her vast life. For this reason there was in India no thought of an antagonism between man and nature, no insatiable desire on the part of man to wrest treasures from nature, or, more prosaically, to detach certain portions of land and make them his very own by building a wall round them. We must break down these

walls and abandon the whole mental attitude which they indicate, if we are to reach oneness with Nature and the Universal. This idea is beautifully expressed in *Gitanjali* (p. 29), "I am ever busy building this wall all around, and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day, I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow." We must break down this wall, in which we take so much pride, and which we keep in such good repair. We must breathe the air of nature, which is Divine. The same idea of the necessity of freeing the spirit from artificial restraints is expressed in the *Gitanjali* also under the figures of sweeping away tinsel or breaking through a chain (28 and 31).

At the same time we should be careful not to allow ourselves to degenerate into mere naturalism and materialism. We must not so abandon ourselves to the particularising worship of the various objects in nature as to forget the central spiritual unity. We "must clearly realise some central truth which will give an outlook over the widest possible field" (*Sadhana* 27). The *All* is possessed when we find the *One*, and the *One* may be discovered if we follow the teaching of the *Upanishads* and descend to the depths of the human soul. And in this region where the divine and human meet, we shall discover, not by reasoning or demonstration, but by a direct flash of intuition, "the bridge leading to the immortal being."

Thus, in striving towards a full realisation of the capacities of its nature, the soul takes two directions—outwards and inward. It may lay stress upon being or upon becoming, upon essence or upon manifestation. The chief contribution which Rabindranath makes to the development of Indian thought is his union of these two attitudes, his constant insistence that a consciousness of the spirituality of the universe must not be allowed to deprive the universe of meaning. He thinks that if the Western thinker has been mistaken in directing his attention too exclusively outwards, the Eastern thinker, on the other hand, has occupied himself too exclusively with the inward aspect of reality. He has despised the "open field of the exercise

of power" and "the world of extension." Of himself and his countrymen Rabindranath says, "We would realise Brahma in meditation only in his aspect of completeness, we have determined not to see him in the commerce of the universe, in his aspect of evolution. That is why in our seekers we so often find the intoxication of the spirit and its consequent degradation. Their faith would acknowledge no bondage of law, their imagination soars unrestricted, their conduct disdains to offer any explanation to reason. Their intellect, in its vain attempts to see Brahma inseparable from his creation, works itself stonedry, and their heart seeking to confine him within its own outpourings, swoons in a drunken ecstasy of emotion. They have not even kept within reach of any standard whereby they can measure the loss of strength and character which manhood sustains by thus ignoring the bonds of law and the claims of action in the external universe" (*Sadhana*, 127).

We could hardly desire more vigorous protest than this against the destructive tendencies which are inherent in traditional Indian philosophy and which manifest themselves in the degradation of its pure spirituality to the level of non-ethical emotionalism and quietism. It is part of Rabindranath's greatness that he is so discriminating in regard to the exact quality of his debt to the thought of his own land. He takes up a resolute attitude in regard to the conception of *maya* (illusion). He will have none of it as an explanation of the miseries and confusions of human thought and life. For him it is only a *description*, or at most a hint that nothing can really exist apart from God. He will not for a moment agree to the depreciation of the manifestations of God which is usually involved in the conception. "Who so steeped in untruth as to dare to call all this untrue—this great world of men, this civilisation of expanding humanity, this eternal effort of man. . . . He who can think of this immensity of achievement as an immense fraud, can he truly believe in God who is the truth?" (*Sadhana*, 130).



Two consequences, with effect upon the religious life, emerge from this protest. If the world is not unmeaning, it is unmeaning to leave it behind. Mere renunciation or sacrifice for its own sake is valueless. Renunciation ought to mean only the giving up of the lower for the sake of the higher, of the narrower for the sake of the wider. It is a *readjustment* of values, a fuller realisation than in the unawakened state of the capabilities of the soul; it is not a destruction of these capabilities. Neither can we find any justification for withdrawal from the ordinary life of humanity. It is the utmost foolishness to sacrifice "the grand self-expression of humanity" for "incessant self-consecration." "Who is there that thinks this secluded communion the highest form of religion?" (*Sadhana*, 129).

The other consequence is that we find, for almost the first time in Indian philosophy, a clear emphasis upon activity as the highest form of religious expression. It is true that there are traces in the *Upanishads* of a regard for the conception of divine activity, but the prevailing Indian tendency is to view the God who manifests himself in the universe as the penultimate and not the ultimate form of the Divine, and the very conception of him as a more or less weak concession to human poverty of religious expression. The consequence of this, again, is that human activity can at best be only a means, and can have no permanent meaning or value. In the writings of Vivekananda activity is chiefly valued because it provides a means for the realisation of the worthlessness of the world. But with Rabindranath human activity is a co-operation with God. It is no doubt also a means of moral purification, for he tells us that it is when the soul "sleeps in stagnation" that its enemies gain overmastering strength. But the highest motive for human activity is that God has worked and is working. "It is not enough that He should alone work to relieve our want, but He should give us the desire and the strength to work with him in his activity and in the exercise of his goodness" (*Sadhana*, 132). Occasionally this conception of the Divine working is expressed in such

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an excessively pantheistic manner (as, *e.g.*, in the phrase "the irresistible current of thy universal energy") as to imply a passive yielding to an overwhelming world-might. But, on the whole, the working of God is used as a metaphysical basis for a conception of the worth of human activity, and in order to supply that activity with a religious motive. In work we find at once the reality of our own souls and a means of communion with God. "Where can I meet thee unless in my home made thine? Where can I join thee unless in this my work transformed into thy work? If I leave my home I shall not reach thy home; if I cease my work, I can never join thee in thy work" (*Sadhana*, 163). The idea that in order to share in the divine working we need not leave our ordinary occupations is emphasized and given more definitely social reference in the well-known passage in *Gitanjali*: "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads. . . . Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee. He is where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil." It is noteworthy as showing how thought in India is breaking away from the older conceptions, that in the recent frequent references to Rabindranath's work, this has been amongst the passages most frequently quoted by his own countrymen.

An idea closely connected with the foregoing, but at the same time one which marks a great advance upon previous Indian thought, is that the working of God is full of purpose. This conception presents a very decided contrast to the teaching of the other great leader of modern religious thought, Vivekananda. For him the ideal is a conception to be treated with scorn, and is useful only to inspire the ignorant to a semblance of morality. But for Rabindranath the working of God is a true revelation of his purpose. Especially in the history of humanity is his will revealed. The progress of humanity is as the move-

ment of a triumphal car, and God is the charioteer directing it to its goal. Man fulfils his duty in answering the call to join in this triumphal progress. And, seeing that this onward march of the purposes of God is one that may be described in moral terms, we get here at last what we have long been searching for in vain in Indian philosophy—a metaphysical and religious basis for morality. It is now allowed that moral predicates may be attributed to God and may become a description of his working. In the conception of the good we recognise “an inner kinship” with God. The divine activity is no longer aimless, but conforms to laws of the nature of God, and these laws furnish a basis for morality. The moral life thus becomes the universal life. To live in perfect goodness is to realise one’s life in the All, and this, according to Rabindranath, was the heavenly vision which illuminated the words and thoughts and deeds of the Christ. Thus goodness becomes distinguished from evil in that the former is infinitely more real than the latter. We have passed far beyond the doctrine of Vivekananda, according to which good and evil are but the obverse and reverse of the same coin. We are no longer asked to admit that the quantity of good and evil are equal and that every increase of good means a corresponding increase of evil. We are no longer put off with Vivekananda’s grudging concession that good may be “a coating slightly nearer to reality than evil.” The ideal is no longer merely a temporary conception useful for the restraint of the mentally childish. We no longer look upon unrestrained activity as in itself a means of liberation. On the contrary, Rabindranath tells us, as Vivekananda, in consistency, ought also to have told us, that “where there is madness of license, the soul ceases to be free” (*Sadhana*, 119). Duty is not to be regarded as the bondage of the slave. On the contrary, it is the law and harmony of the universe, and in the performance of it alone can we win peace and freedom for our souls. “The bass and treble strings of our duty are only bonds so long as we cannot maintain them steadfastly attuned according to the law of truth” (*Sadhana*, 128).

This strongly ethical conception of the universe and of human activity in relation to it, necessitates a still further advance upon the prevalent Indian ideas of human freedom. For the first time in Indian philosophical and religious thought freedom also wins a satisfactory metaphysical basis. The teaching of Rabindranath in this respect marks a definite breach with the tradition he has inherited, and entitles him to be called the herald of the coming of dawn. He recognises that co-operation and communion are unintelligible conceptions unless they involve two factors, both of which are permanently valuable. Determinism in the temporal action of the individual and his final absorption in the Universal are alike alien to the main tendency of Rabindranath's teaching. Human freedom is a gift from God. It is an outcome of the divine joy, that joy which we begin to understand when we rise above conceptions of mere law and utility, when, *e.g.*, a flower ceases to be for us only a means to the fruit, and becomes a revelation of beauty and a mirror for the mind of God. This conception of *joy* is illuminative of the whole question. Joy, in order to be fully realised, involves duality; when we rejoice we wish others to share our joy, and, if no friends are present with us, we, as it were, tell our joy to a second self. It is the same with God, and thus we see that the outcome of the divine *joy* is the divine *love*.

Again, love can persist only as it secures reciprocity, *i.e.*, in communion with a will which is free to return an answer of love. "Thy love for me still waits for my love" (*Gitanjali*, 32). In order to procure such an answering love, God imposes limitations upon himself. He restrains himself from interference with the will of man and refuses to rob him of the fulness of his personality. This personality will be allowed to continue and expand, and the increase of it will constitute an even more complete answer to the love of God. Though, as we have seen, Rabindranath uses phrases, such as "merging in the universal," which have a definitely pantheistic colouring, he does not

fall into Vivekananda's fallacy of thinking that the individual self must always be the selfish self, and that, therefore, in order to get rid of selfishness, this individual self must be altogether abandoned. He does not urge the annihilation of anything that is of value in personality. It is only the "pride of personality" that we must leave behind; for this "will be a curse if we cannot give it up in love" (*Sadhana*, 91). We have only to see that we do not fret against circumstances, that the current of our life does not break through the banks and lose itself in low-lying marshes. It must flow clear and strong to the awaiting sea of the Divine Love. Nothing of value, we repeat, according to the teaching of Rabindranath, is to be left behind. At the very least we must retain sufficient strength to surrender our strength to the will of God (cf. *Gitanjali*, 36). Our closer union with God means increase in the fulness of our own personality—"Man's deepest joy is in growing greater and greater by more and more union with the All"; and conversely "the more vigorous our individuality, the more does it widen towards the universal" (59 and 61). And in our fulness of individual life and strength we shall enter into the joy of God, we shall hear the song of the Eternal and "translate back the singing into the original joy." If there is pain in our lives, we shall realise that it is but a means to our perfecting, and shall thus understand that it is the symbol of the possibility of joy.

The religious philosophy of Rabindranath thus ends on a note of resolute optimism. "Pain is not a fixture in life," and "the essence of evil is impermanence." It would seem ungracious to object to this strengthening of the optimistic elements in our view of life, especially as optimism is somewhat rare in Indian writing. We certainly do not object to the optimism of this teaching. On the contrary, we regard this optimism as one of the signs of the return of vitality to Indian thought. We thoroughly agree with the dictum of Rabindranath himself that "pessimism is a form of dipsomania, disdaining healthy

nourishment," and that the mere fact of our continuing in existence proves that existence is worthy of continuance (cf. *Sadhana*, p. 56). But, at the same time, we cannot help an uncomfortable feeling that the optimism here is a little too facile, that it is in danger of approaching rather too closely the superficial kind of optimism which passes so readily into pessimism when confronted with the tragedies and the deeper seriousness of life. There are undoubtedly genuinely optimistic elements in Rabindranath's teaching, and we connect these elements closely with the non-pantheistic aspects of his doctrine, with his emphasis upon the revealing character of morality, upon the value of personality and of the ordinary life of action. But we feel at the same time that he has not, in the building of his system as a whole, gone down to the bed-rock foundation of these non-pantheistic conceptions. Sometimes it would seem as if he were content with the shifting sand of pantheistic speculation. There is thus a certain instability about the whole edifice. It is a magnificent palace of thought and beauty which he has erected, but sometimes we feel as if we should prefer to dwell in the open rather than in a building whose foundations are in part so insufficiently secured.

In plain language, our criticism is that our author has not sufficiently considered the implications of the Divine gift of freedom to man. This freedom, if the conception of it is to enable us to deal with the actual facts of life, must be a real freedom. In other words it must be a freedom to do evil as well as to do good; and this evil, again, must be distinctly recognised as more than error and as more than temporary. Rabindranath no doubt admits the existence of sin and the painful consciousness of it. He quotes the prayer with earnest sympathy, "Father, completely sweep away all my sins," and, again, he describes sin as "the blurring of truth which clouds the purity of our consciousness" (*Sadhana*, 38), and as "the innermost barrier which keeps us apart from God." By sin he allows that our vision of the truth is obstructed.

But is this all? We ask whether it is not possible to have a vision of the truth and yet refuse to follow the truth. And, again, we may become hardened into a depraved habit of mind, which, though not original, may yet be inseparable, in so far as our own unaided efforts to remove it are concerned. Sinfulness may not be our nature, but it may be our second nature. It seems to us that Rabindranath's philosophy of religion overlooks these possibilities, overlooks the fact that even God has to pay a price for the creation of human freedom. This price consists in taking the risk that man may abuse his freedom and may find himself helpless in the grasp of sin. And so, in face of this possibility, which our deepest moral consciousness must admit has become an actuality, joy cannot be regarded as the only element in the heart of God. There must be sorrow as well. This sorrow will not express itself in mere sentimental pity or facile forgiveness. As we believe that the moral nature of God is a constant, there must be in God the attitude of opposition to the sin which human beings have introduced. The conception of the wrath of God does *not* belong to obsolete systems of theology; it is the correspondence in the Divine to the quickened conscience of the individual, and this correspondence can never cease. But the wrath of God is certainly not the last word. As the moral qualities of God remain constant, so also does his joy; only in face of human sin the joy will be an ideal which has once more to be reached through the dealing with human sin. In relation to man the joy will now have to express itself in love which is more than mere benevolence, more than forgetful forgiveness or the gift of enlightenment. It will express itself in redemption, in a bringing of the divine strength to the aid of human weakness, in a restoration of the fallen will. A gospel which consists merely in joy can be satisfactory only if the mind has been enlightened and the will has been already turned towards goodness; but without a conception of the sorrowing love and regenerating power of God it fails to touch the deepest need of humanity,

and appeals only to the select few who have had the benefits of enlightenment and who have already shown to a certain extent a consciousness of the nearness of God. A true optimism must dig deeper and lay broader foundations than Rabindranath has done. It must not represent the unity of God and man so simply that we forget that it is possible to wander far away from God on the paths of evil and of sin, and that the return to God must be much more than a placid following of the course of nature. The possibility of return becomes a certainty only if the separating distance and the difficulties of the return have been correctly estimated, only if we realise that the winning of the best often means not only a constant onward progress but also an entire reversal, in pain perhaps, of the direction in which our inclinations have previously led us. There is too little of the cutting off of the offending right hand or foot in Rabindranath's philosophy. There is a danger that when we yearn that "our emptied life may be dipped in the ocean" and "plunged in the deepest fulness," our sense of responsibility may also be engulfed, or that, when we say that we must "become Brahman," we forget that the ideal is communion rather than unity, and that it is possible for us, and possible for those whose uplifting we desire, to *refuse* to enter into that communion. A religion which is to lead to victory and to permanent joy must be able to deal effectively even with such a refusal. The philosophy of Rabindranath stands between the old world and the new in Indian thought-development. He retains what is best in Indian pantheistic tradition—its abhorrence of materialism, its intense spirituality and its conception of the nearness of the divine to the human. He points out relentlessly the defects of abstract pantheism, and rightly exhibits the religious attractiveness of the concrete world in which we live. He emphasises the defects of that philosophy which would evacuate our experiences of their highest meaning and deprive us of inspiration for activity. He draws a clear distinction between good and evil, and finds a truly religious basis for morality. He pre-



serves for time and for eternity the value of the individual, and discovers an explanation of human freedom in the conception of the self-limitation of God. But his pantheism still prevents him from sounding the depths of the problems of sin, from realising all that is involved in this gift of freedom and from becoming clearly conscious of the central need of the human soul. The progress of Indian religious thought will consist in the carrying forward, in greater freedom from the burden of tradition, Rabindranath's own criticism of the philosophical inheritance, and in a greater readiness to receive and develop the ideas from other sources by which he has already been so largely inspired.

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